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ABSTRACT

This document focuses on the difficulties associated with offering college students an introductory course in human services. The need for an introductory course to provide a survey of the field, to offer students a chance for self-exploration, and to lay the groundwork for career choice and an understanding of the vast array of human services is reviewed along with the challenges facing the instructor of such a course. Ten challenges which are especially important in the beginning courses are enumerated and discussed in detail. The textbook review section outlines a content review of five recent texts designed for introductory human services courses. The experiences of instructors from the field are described and several suggestions are offered for professional organizations to help instructors meet the challenges of the introductory course. (Author/NRB)

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HUMAN SERVICES: THE CHALLENGE OF THE INTRODUCTORY COURSE

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HUMAN SERVICES: THE CHALLENGE OF THE INTRODUCTORY COURSE

Most students entering a human services program, be they new high school graduates or returning adult students, have only vague notions of what the human service field entails. Their confusion is not surprising. Not only is the field a relatively new one, it is defined much as is the elephant described by the nine blind men. Further, students have not studied human services in high school, nor in all probability do they think of specific or general helping roles as "human services."

For this reason, and others which we discuss below, most human services degree programs seek to acquaint their students with the field through a beginning course typically entitled Introduction to Human Services. Not all professions do this; many programs in business, pharmacy, and engineering, as examples, do not offer introductory courses to their majors. Perhaps they have a luxury which we do not: Their students enter the program with satisfactory confidence (however ill-warranted it may be) that they know enough about what business people/engineers/pharmicists do to be comfortable with their career choice. Or perhaps these older fields have learned what most of us have not: The challenge of the introductory course is so extreme that it is best avoided and the synthesis left to the students or to the "capstone" course required of the survivors.

In this article, we shall discuss our reasons for believing that there should be an introductory course in human services, present ten

challenges the course offers the instructor, outline our content review of five recent introductory texts, and discuss some views from instructors. The materials for the views from the field was provided in part by the participants at the 1981 National Organization for Human Service Educators (NOHSE) conference in Chicago who attended our presentaton of an earlier form of this paper; we gratefully acknowledge their contributions to the development of this paper. Finally, we offer some suggestions on how human service professional organizations such as NOHSE can help instructors meet the challenges of the introductory course.

The Need for an Introductory Course

Though not all fields offer an introductory course to their students, we believe it is crucial to do so in human services. We previewed our first reason above: in an emerging field such as human services, students need an introduction which will define the boundaries. On our own campuses, we are still asked, "What is human services?" The least that we can do for our students is to help them understand the dimensions of the field. Second, a common basic belief in human services is the need for "examination of self" to help the student decide whether a tentatively chosen career field is consistent with his or her own values.

Third, no matter what specialization is chosen, all human service workers must confront a range of problems in helping consumers. Consumers must be provided with information about services, and students must learn about the field so that information and referral work may be accomplished accurately and comprehensively. Fourth, human services workers must understand the commonalities of their concerns, their

problems, their objectives. For too long, separate occupational groups have claimed the human services territory and acted as if they had a monopoloy on it; the introductory course can play an early role in helping students avoid the professional ethnocentrism that plagues many practitioners. Our fifth and final reaason for our belief in the importance of the introductory course is that it has a valuable role to play in providing students with an early opportunity for career exploration.

For some combination of the reasons outlined above, or for reasons of their own, faculty in most human services programs have decided to include and require in their programs an introductory course.

The Dilemmas and Problems

All teaching is challenging; teaching an introductory course in any field presents extra challenges. And, we believe, teaching an introductory course in human services presents special challenges to those who are brave, foolish, or "lucky" enough to undertake the assignment.

Below, we present ten challenges in teacning the introductory course in human services; we have concentrated on those challenges which we feel are especially important in the beginning course. The professor whose responsiblity it is to teach the course will, to some degree, confront all ten of the problems; and the way in which they are met will structure student experiences. While we most certainly are not arguing for a standard introductory course in human services, we are concerned about the array of possible courses that a student might confront depending on

how the challenges are met.

1. Breadth versus depth. The range of possible subject matter for an introductory course in human services is vast; clearly, deep examination of all potential subject matter is impossible. Ought one, then, trip lightly over the whole field, or should there be an in-depth focus on an area or two, with continuing admonitions to students that they are seeing only a part? To some degree, the answer lies in one's assumptions about the nature of the subject matter and how people learn.

2. Focus on career. For many students the introductory course may serve as a springboard into career selection. Ought not the course, in this case, present the full range of career options? Again, the problem is primarily one of time. Even with a full semester devoted to the examination of career options, students may not learn enough about any one career to be confident of their choices. With the range of competing subject matter, the focus on careers may be so brief as to provide students with little useful information.

3. Student purposes. Students enter an introductory course with a variety of their own purposes. How can a course be structured to respond to the need of students who know they want to be human service workers, and the needs of students who are not sure why they have taken the course?

Or, should this range of of varying student purposes be taken into account at all? Should the course be structured by the instructor's purposes and the demands that the course serve primarily to prepare students for more advanced work?

4. Knowledge, skill, and experience. Perhaps the most important

question is that of the purpose of the course. Is it to be primarily a "disciplinary" course with the major objective to impart information? Or is it to be a "professional" course, designed to teach students the skills of helping? Or, finally, is it an "experiential" course, which lets students learn about the world of human services by living in it for a period of time?

An introductory course could be designed around each of these central purpose -- and they would differ radically from each other. To balance two or all three central purposes in a single course presents its own challenges.

5. Keeping the gate -- carefully. This course, as must every introductory course in a professional field, has the responsiblity of discouraging those who seem to be unsuited for future work in the field, while presenting strong appeal to others. The challenge is to accomplish these functions simultaneously.

6. The role of theory. Theories are descriptive; they are efforts to understand existing, selected phenomena. The provision of human services is a practical matter; it involves decisions, alternatives, and actions. A good theory can guide action and provide a basis for interpretation of outcomes, a difficult point to make with beginning students.

Our experiences with instructional materials in human services reveals an unfortunate lack of attention to theory and its role in action. Commonly called the "knowledge bases" in most introductory material, theory is given short shrift, and may focus, for example,

briefly on Freud, one theory of human development, a brief description of services since 1602, and nothing more.

7. Undefined field. Human services currently suffers from a range of definitions. Each career or disciplinary area is attempting to claim that the movement arose within it. Unfortunately, each also characterizes the field largely in terms of its own defintions and boundaries. However, the field is as broad as all of us and must be presented as such. As we shall show later, no currently available textbook does this. And, as we all know, the textbook too often defines the course, at least from the students' point of view.

8. Background of the instructor. To a great extent, we all suffer from the same problems as the texts: a single focus in our graduate training. Graduate programs that present the field of human services broadly simply did not exist when most of us were graduate students. Indeed, the extent to which they are available now is problematic. The challenge to the instructor is to present a broad field when one's view of that field is largely self-taught.

9. Keeping current. All instructors must keep current, but the problem of keeping current to teach introductory courses in fields such as mathematics or philosophy are not of the same order of magnitude as keeping current in human services. The issue is probably as dramatic today as it has been at any time; the Reagan administration has brought overwhelming change. We almost need to think of teaching from the newspaper as a primary source.

10. Jargon. As a field which recognizes and supports the

contributions made by volunteers and paraprofessionals, human services is acutely aware of the problems of jargon. The challenge, which appears in the introductory course and continues throughout the program is: How can we teach students to be conversant with the terminology without teaching Jargon as a Second Language?

Responses to some of these problems can be made only in the context of program which the introductory course is introducing. We do not mean to suggest that the first course should be viewed in isolation. In fact, we urge instructors of the introductory course to collaborate in planning with all of his/her colleagues.

Textbook Review

How are the challenges of the introductory course met? What degree of commonality exists from instructor to instructor, institution to institution? One of the best available, though indirect, indicators of which areas are considered important for an introductory course is the content of available text books. We reviewed five recent texts designed for introductory human services courses. The texts we selected were those that attempted an overview of the field; we did not include texts designed to help teach specific helping skills or those that seemed more suitable for a more advanced course. The selected texts were:

1) Delivering Human Services: An Introductory Programmed Text by Michael Austin, Alexis Skelding, and Philip Smith (Harper and Row, 1977);

2) Helping: Human Services for the '80's by Frank Baker and John

Northman (Mosby, 1981);

3) The New Professional (Second Edition) by James Dugger (Brooks/Cole, 1980);

4) An Introduction to Human Services by Charlotte Epstein (Prentice Hall, 1981);

5) Human Services by Joseph Mehr (Allyn and Bacon, 1980)

The five books differ in several important ways, including: 1) the degree to which mental health and human services are viewed almost synonymously (e.g., more so with Mehr and Dugger, less so with Epstein); 2) the degree to which the book was designed for students in an associate's degree program as opposed to students in a four year program (e.g., more so with Dugger, less so with Baker and Northman); and 3) the degree to which they deal with micro issues such as values and helping skills as opposed to macro issues such as policy (e.g., more so with Epstein through the exercises, less so with Baker and Northman who focus more on systems).

To examine the content of the five books, we reviewed the textual portions (excluding the exercises) of each book page by page. We developed a set of topics that were represented by coverage of at last one to two pages of material, depending on the density of textual material per page. Thus, we did not begin with a preconceived set of topics, but developed our list from the material we found in the books.

The degree of agreement of the texts in their content coverage was less than we had expected. For example, out of the 59 separate topics identified, only three were common to all five texts:

Roles of human services workers

Crisis intervention

Social factors/problems/deviance.

An additional five topics were common to four of the five texts:

Human services movement/ideology

Integration of services

Generalist helping roles

Effective helping principles

Paraprofessionals/professionals/career ladders.

Ten topics were common to three of the five texts; forty one topics were covered by only one or two of the books. We should note here that the amount of agreement that may be implied by the above data is probably higher than is the actual case, since we did not attempt to determine the degree to which the various authors presented similar or even compatible views on the various topics.

Several topics frequently mentioned as important to the field of human services were covered by only three of the five texts; examples include:

Community mental health

Ethical issues

Group dynamics/interpersonal behavior

Other important areas were covered by only one or two of the texts; examples incude:

Indigenous helpers

Agency competition/cooperation

Systems theory.

Overall, the degree of agreement among the five introductory texts we reviewed is considerably less than one might typcially find in older, more established fields such as psychology or sociology. This lack of common agreement among the texts may indicate considerable diversity among the various introductory courses available. It may also suggest that instructors must choose the best available text and work on their own to fill the gaps.

Some Views from the Field

One of the purposes of our paper presentation at the NOHSE conference was to engage attendees in a discussion of the problems of teaching an introductory human services course. The score of participants, most of whom revealed personal experience in such endeavors, richly rewarded us.

We used an informal questionnaire to help focus the discussion on topics that would be most controversial or difficult. The particpants were asked to read a series of eleven statements about how an introductory course might be taught (e.g., "Should focus on the history and philosophy of the helping professions") and choose the one statement with which they most agreed and the one with which they most disagreed.

The results revealed support for teaching an integrated view of services rather than approaching them separately, and for providing a course that would be equally useful to human service majors and non-majors. This first finding is not surprising. The second, we believe, warrants further exploration. Pragmatically, the inclusion of non-majors can provide additional enrolllments for a program. Further, a

case can be made that since all citizens are touched by the human services system, understanding it may be viewed as part of a broad, general, and contemporary education.

Respondents did not seem to feel that a focus on the particular services offered in a local community would prematurely blind students to the "big picture." Several also indicated strong disagreement with the view that an introductory course should focus almost entirely on programs, planning, policy, and evaluation, rather than on interpersonal issues.

One of the most difficult issues, as revealed by the discussion, was the way in which students should begin to gain some personal experience in human services. On some campuses, this is done as part of the introductory course; on other campuses it is handled in a separate course offered either concurrent with or after the introductory course. Goals of the early introduction to the field include: 1) self-selection into or out of the program; 2) gaining understanding of various services; 3) early identification of the flaws and gaps in the human services delivery system; and 4) understanding the perspective of a citizen trying to gain access to various services.

Methods of early introduction to the field experience vary and include encouragement of students to work on a telephone "hot line" and "required volunteering" in an agency. One instructor in our group said she asked students in her classes to develop an imaginary consumer sitution, such as that of an unwed pregnant teen-ager, and by use of the telephone, approach local agencies for help. Using local resource

publications and referrals, the students determine the reactions that someone "in their situation" might actually get from the agencies. The agencies, which are told in advance of the project, are said to appreciate the feedback they receive from the class project.

Participants identified a common problem with early field experiences requirement: from time to time human services programs attract some students whom the college is reluctant to send into the field, students who are drawn to a program more to work out their own problems than from mature readiness to help others. The most typical solutions to this problem include the instructor's active role in helping the student use the first course for self selection, referral to other sources of help, and the use of a "cooler" alternative to a field placement, such as construction of a resource guide or a reading/writing assignment.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Teaching an introductory course presents a formidible set of challenges to the instructor. Because of the special demands placed on such a course (e.g., to both attract and screen students, to present a broad and ill-defined field clearly, and to balance didactic with skill and experiential learning), continuing examination of these challenges is important to the field.

The National Organization of Human Service Educators has a natural role to play and an opportunity to help instructors of the introductory course deal with the challenges. Below are our specific ideas for how NOHSE can help us meet these challenges:

1) Offer a film fair at the annual meeting where instructors can preview and discuss both documentary (e.g., Best Boy) and fictional (e.g., King of Hearts) films. (The New England Journal of Human Services has recently begun a regular feature of human service film reviews.)

2) Provide reviews of introductory (and other human services) texts which focus on issues such as readability, comprehensiveness, and general orientation, as well as on specific content inclusion. These reviews might be included as a regular feature of th NOHSE Journal.

3) Make available to members bibliographies of fiction (e.g., Woman on the Edge of Time) and non-fiction (e.g., Welfare Mother) that may be useful as supplementary texts.

4) Establish a clearinghouse of course outlines, field guides, assignments, and other teaching aides. These materials could be shared not only at the annual meeting, but might also be available to all members to order at cost.

5) Schedule conversation hours debates, and other innovative formats for discussion of the introductory course (and other instructional issues) at the annual meeting.

6) Actively develop lists of instructors of introductory courses from among NOHSE members and non-members (a recruiting tool for membership?) and provide the list to publishers of human service texts.

The challenge of the introductory course will continue to confront us. NOHSE is in an excellent position to help us meet that challenge.

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